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AUTHOR Corey, Jennifer M.; German, Kathleen M.
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ABSTRACT

Corazon Aquino's appearance before the U.S. Congress provides an opportunity for the rhetorical critic to study (1) how the form of speech--particularly the romantic form--enabled Aquino to establish the legitimacy of her claims as President of the Philippines; (2) how she used her role as Benigno Aquino's widow to complete the romantic myth; and (3) what long-term implications this mythic form imposes for the Aquino presidency. The romantic mythos of hero meeting and defeating villain after a prolonged struggle occurs on three distinct levels in the Aquino address. First, the physical confrontation between Ferdinand Marcos and Benigno Aquino establishes the myth. Second, democracy wages its war against the evils of oppression as the Filipino people rally to the cause of freedom, and finally, the global confrontation of democracy and communism involves the United States and newly free Philippines in alliance. By inviting the United States to assume the role of the martyred "Ninoy" as husband and protector, Aquino seals the success of her appeal, evident from the positive reactions from Congress. However using the romantic myth may have both good and bad long-term implications. On the negative side, the myth may add to Aquino's posture as an impotent, fragile leader. On the positive side is the potent emotional impact in both the Philippines and the United States, which has empowered a politically disenfranchised people and resulted in extra aid. (Thirty-one notes are included.) (MS)

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MRS. AQUINO GOES TO WASHINGTON:

COMPLETING THE ROMANTIC MYTH IN CORAZON AQUINO'S 1986 ADDRESS TO THE JOINT SESSION OF CONGRESS

Jennifer M. Corey
Special Assistant
Government Service Task Force

Kathleen M. German
Miami University
Oxford, Ohio

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MRS. AQUINO GOES TO WASHINGTON

COMPLETING THE ROMANTIC MYTH IN CORAZON AQUINO'S 1986 ADDRESS TO THE JOINT SESSION OF CONGRESS

On September 18, 1986, Corazon Aquino, recently elected President of the Philippines, became just the fifth woman in the history of the United States to address a joint session of Congress. Not only did Aquino speak before this legislative body but she left with a "$200 million dollar honorarium" in economic aid for her nation despite Congressional budget restraints imposed by the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings bill. [1] The overwhelming success of her appearance in spite of predictions that she would not realize her goal and the rare appearance of a woman before a joint session of Congress provide an interesting study for the rhetorical critic. This paper will investigate the following questions: How did the form of the speech--in particular, its romantic form--enable Aquino to establish the legitimacy of her claims as President of the Philippines? How was Aquino able to utilize her role as Benigno Aquino's widow to complete the romantic myth? What long-term implications does the form impose for the Aquino presidency?

In order to fully understand the form of the speech, one must first consider the political situation prior to the speech. On August 21, 1983, Philippine Senator Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino was assassinated at the Manila International Airport upon his return from a three-year exile in the United States. This pivotal event was at once the consummation of Aquino's political career and the conception of the campaign that would carry his wife Corazon to the Presidency of the Philippines. In the Philippines, "the murder of Aquino was a catalyst that could only profit the opponents of the Marcos administration" by providing them with a martyr. [2] The assassination accomplished in short order exactly what the Marcos regime had hoped to avert by keeping the

opposition fragmented and powerless. [3] Corazon Aquino, the widow of the martyred Benigno, became the symbol of democracy around which a chaotic opposition and a beleaguered people would rally. At the same time, the American press viewed Corazon as a housewife with "little political experience beyond preparing meals for the politicians who were friends of her husband." [4]

From the American perspective, the primary problems facing the Aquino government were inextricably entwined. Her government was perceived as unstable because of individual cabinet members' opposition to her negotiations with the New People's Army (or NPA, the Communist military front) while the Communist threat intensified. [5] In addition, the Philippine economy continued to experience massive problems including "a huge budget deficit, a network of inefficient, private monopolies and public corporations, a private sector demoralized by political uncertainties . . . and an agricultural sector in deep recession." [6] Such disastrous economic conditions enhanced the environment for sustaining the communist insurgency. Of these problems, perhaps the threat of increased Communist insurgency posed the most pressing problem--at least for American observers. Prior to her arrival in Washington, a senior official, widely believed to have been Donald Regan, condemned her handling of the Communists. [7] Upon her arrival in Washington, Aquino was informed by President Reagan that the Communist guerrillas remained a threat to democracy in the Philippines. [8] At their meeting the day before her address, Reagan advised Aquino to be careful and told her of his experiences fighting Communists in the actors' union in the early 1950's. [9]

In sum, Aquino spoke from a position perceived to be weak, perhaps augmented by her gender, but certainly by the American view that her training for leadership consisted of eavesdropping on her husband's political conversations with friends while serving meals. Aquino coped with these constraints by extending these perceptions of subordinate status and implicating the

United States in a relationship as the protector of herself and her nation. In a very real sense, the United States government replaced the martyred Benigno Aquino and took on the role of colonial protector of the Philippines. In this manner Corazon Aquino was able to play upon her widowhood in her attempt to woo the U.S. to assume protection of the fragile, fledgling democracy. This appeal works because Aquino successfully creates and sustains a romantic myth featuring polarization.

The Romantic Myth. Myths form a central body of stories that are intrinsic to a specific society because they set out what are believed to be the essential facts about its gods, its history, and its social structure. Myths reflect the core of that society's shared experience and add the dimensions of history and tradition to its verbal culture. [10]

According to Northrup Frye, the mythos of romance is characterized by a four-part sequence of discursive events related in a narrative progression: the conflict between hero and enemy, the death-struggle between hero and enemy, the disappearance and apparent defeat of the hero, and the triumphal return of the hero. The four elements are readily identifiable in Aquino's address. The hero is Benigno Aquino; the enemy is Ferdinand Marcos. The conflict between hero and enemy involves democracy:

> He [Marcos] detained my husband along with thousands of others--senators, publishers, and anyone who had spoken up for the democracy as its end drew near. But for Ninoy, a long and cruel ordeal was reserved. [4] [11]

The death-struggle of the mythos occurs as Marcos imprisons and tortures Aquino who refuses to make peace with the regime and abandon his quest for democracy:

> The Government sought to break him by indignities and terror. . . . Ninoy challenged its authority. . . . He held out in the loneliness of his cell and the frustration of exile, the democratic alternative to the insatiable greed

and mindless cruelty of the right and the purging holocaust of the left. [5, 7]

The development of Ninoy's 40 day hunger strike takes on tones of divinity as Aquino subtly associates Benigno Aquino with Christ: both spent 40 days in the wilderness, both were imprisoned, both were martyred. She says of Benigno, "For even as the dictatorship demolished one by one the institutions of democracy--Ninoy kept them alive in himself." [4] Ninoy held forth the hope of democracy for his fellow citizens. To complete the comparison, Aquino summarizes the life of Benigno by repeatedly stating, "God meant him for other things." [6]

She transcends the human actors and defines democracy as an archetypal image, creating the struggle between the hero and enemy in terms of democracy and its opposition. Aquino relates, "But the spirit of democracy that inheres in our race. . . could not be allowed to die." [7] Just as the survival of Benigno in his confrontations with Marcos presages his ultimate divinely directed purpose, so too, democracy lives. It survives, albeit precariously, in the living, breathing defenders of freedom in the Philippines. Aquino does not mention Benigno Aquino's departure from the Philippines nor his delayed return to his native land. The defeat of the hero occurs as he is assassinated at the hands of the opposition. The final exultation of the hero comes with the election of Corazon Aquino. Ninoy's spirit is reborn in her, and when she triumphs over Marcos, her victory represents the victory of freedom over tyranny: "But his death was my country's resurrection in the courage and faith by which alone they could be free again." [8] This Christ-like resurrection of the spirit of democracy ensures the legitimacy of Corazon Aquino's ascension to power and the divine foundation of her administration.

The link between her American listeners and the struggle between democracy and tyranny in the Philippines is not accidental. Aquino pulls her listeners into the drama. At first she does so by developing the common romantic quest between the

two nations: "But the spirit of democracy that inheres our race and animates this Chamber could not be allowed to die." [7] By mentioning that the spirit of democracy inheres in the Chamber of Congress, Aquino reminds her auditors that the fight to maintain democracy in the world is not hers alone, that it is also the avowed duty of the United States. Any freedom-loving people bears responsibility for the birth and death of democracy, not just Corazon Aquino. This subtle transition expands the mythos to a world-wide rather than simply national level. The cause of democracy requires the commitment of others.

The sequence of images Aquino uses is apocalyptic, demonic, and apocalyptic again as she narrates the confrontation of her husband with the evils of the Marcos regime. This chronology of images mimics the romantic mythos. The fledgling democratic nation falls under the dictatorial regime of Ferdinand Marcos, it fights his tyrannical rule, and finally re-establishes its democratic government. Again, Aquino invites her audience to participate in the apocalyptic vision of democracy when she says:

> Many of you here today played a part in changing the policy of your country toward us. We, Filipinos, thank each of you for what you did: For, balancing America's strategic interest against human concerns, illuminates the American vision of the world. [17]

Thus Aquino gives America, especially her immediate audience the members of Congress, credit for the victory of freedom in the Philippines. But, while Aquino's phrasing of the idea praises her auditors, she simultaneously compels them to provide continued assistance in order to fulfill the romantic mythos. She further reinforces the legitimacy of her request by associating herself with an American mythological figure, Abraham Lincoln, echoing his second inaugural address: "That is my contract with my people and my commitment to God." [17] In addition, she uses Senator Richard Lugar's words regarding the election as "an extraordinary manifestation of democracy." [16]

The inevitable conclusion to the romantic myth occurs as

Aquino speaks of her nation's massive foreign debt:

> Yet ours must have been the cheapest revolution ever. With little help from others, we Filipinos fulfilled the first and most difficult condition of the debt negotiation: the full restoration of democracy. . . . [27]

The contrast of the "cheap" revolution with the staggering $26 billion foreign debt incurred under the Marcos regime combines fact and mythological imagery to suggest that aid to the Philippines is the proper course of action for defenders of democracy. After all, the Filipino people have shown their willingness to assume its burdens by reinstating their democratic form of government.

Finally, to clinch the connection between the newly found freedom of the Philippines and its American protector, Aquino paraphrases another mythological American figure, John F. Kennedy. She closes her address with an invitation that is strikingly parallel to wedding vows:

> Today, I say, join us, America, as we build a new home for democracy, another haven for the oppressed, so it may stand as a shining testament of our two nations' commitment to freedom. [33]

Thus, hand-in-hand the United States will befriend the Philippines replacing its lost hero, Benigno Aquino.

In summary, the romantic mythos of hero meeting and defeating villain after a prolonged struggle occurs on three distinct levels in the Aquino address. First, the physical confrontation between Marcos and Benigno Aquino establishes the myth. Second, democracy wages its war against the evils of oppression as the Filipino people rally to the cause of freedom, and finally, the global confrontation of democracy and communism involves the United States and newly free Philippines in alliance. The progression of the romantic mythos in the speech gradually entwines listeners in the compelling persuasion of the myth. Once the polarization of good and evil, hero and villain are accepted and the transformations between the levels of

symbols occur, the natural consequence of the mythic structure must be commitment to action. It is not surprising that Aquino secured not only the good will but the financial aid of her listeners. An analysis of the romantic mythos explains the tremendous success of this speech.

Completing the Myth. Corazon Aquino completes the myth of the romance in her own role as widow. The final lines of the address echo the commitment of wedding vows and complete the metaphor of making a home for her children, her Filipino people, and their democracy. So too, Corazon invites the United States to assume the role of the martyred Ninoy as husband and protector. Earlier she hinted at such a commitment by reminding her listeners of Lincoln's words and resolve to bind the wounds of those caught up in the Civil War:

> . . . let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle **and for his widow and his orphan,** to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations. [25]

The success of her appeal is evident in the kinds of reactions of her listeners. The address was interrupted by sustained applause ten or eleven times. [12] "It was the best speech I've ever heard in my thirty-four years in Congress," said House Speaker Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill. [13] Immediate response from Members of Congress was enthusiastically supportive. Senator Robert Dole said to Aquino afterward, "You hit a home run," to which Aquino responded "I hope the bases were loaded." [14] Rep. Henry Hyde (R-IL) said, "She's a doll. She's on the right track, and shows consummate finesse and good political instincts." [15] Rep. David Obey (D-WI) responded, "She really hit a home run. It was the most coherent, moral justification for any government's policy in a long time." [16] Sen. Lugar proclaimed of the atmosphere during the speech, "Those who attended were transfixed. It was awesome . . . It was great

theatre" [17] During National Public Radio's live coverage of the speech, commentator Alan Berlo noted that some members of congress were so moved by Aquino's words that they wiped their eyes. [18] Later reactions during floor debate on the $200 million aid bill add further evidence of the speech's tremendous emotional impact. Rep. David Obey summarizes the sentiment: "I may have heard a more eloquent speech on the floor of this House in the seventeen years that I have been here, but if I have, I cannot remember what it was." [19]

Additional reactions of members of the House and Senate confirm Aquino's successful use of romantic mythos. The most tangible result of her speech was the surprise vote for $200 million in additional aid to the Philippines. "The speech was worth at least fifty votes," remarked Rep. Steven J. Solarz (D-NY), chair of the Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific. [20] Solarz also said Aquino's speech "transformed the atmosphere on Capitol Hill and drastically enhanced prospects" for final approval of the legislation. [21] "They desperately need this additional assistance," Solarz concluded. "It will not solve the problem by itself, but it will help them deal with the problem." [22]

The extraordinary impact of the Aquino speech can be explained by the romantic mythos she constructs with the narrative of her widowhood, the establishment of a new home for democracy, and the invitation for the U.S. to join with her in protecting that newfound refuge.

Implications for Future Rhetoric. Because Aquino has argued from a narrative she created legitimating her own succession to the presidency of the Philippines, she has defined her role as President and both the actions and statements she can reasonably make in the future. In other words, it will be difficult for Aquino to drastically alter the rhetorical boundaries prescribed by the romantic myth (Note: Much of what Aquino said in her appearance before the joint session of congress was contained in

the frequent political appearances during the election campaign in the Philippines so that the same definition has probably been established for that audience as well).

A number of advantages are apparent: First, the appeal has worked well because of its potent emotional impact not only in the Philippines but in the U.S. Symbols such as democracy, the home, slavery, as well as mythical historical figures such as Abraham Lincoln form the foundation of American tradition. Aquino uses such symbols well, weaving together the history of this nation and the hopes of her own nation. Political scientist Daniel F. Doeppers, who examined the "People's Revolution" in terms of its redefinition of the sacred, argues that such redefinition takes place in spite of governmental structure, political planning, and social criticism. Such a definition "simply takes over and seizes a society at a certain point." [23] Aquino's redefinition of herself as "the sacred symbol of the bereaved widow, of the martyr, of the modern madonna," brought about "redemption, or at least a short-term chance of the redemption for the Philippines." [24] In the words of former Senator Raul Manglapus, "We have a new goddess in the pantheon of freedom and the name of that goddess is Corazon Aquino." [25]

The appeal is equally effective in the Philippines for a powerless, politically disenfranchised people. Here the polarization of good and evil and the hope for freedom serve to develop the unity and will to action necessary for a sustained (at least to this point) popular mandate. The frequent use of religious images, particularly the comparison of Benigno Aquino and Christ, are not lost on a Filipino population of predominately traditional Catholics. Ninoy becomes an even more potent symbol than the madonna-like Corazon. His blood was sufficient to redeem the nation. [26]

The whole concept of Filipinos envisioning their leader as a reincarnated hero is not a new one. In 1986 Ian Buruma wrote that Dr. Jose Rizal, a Philippine hero of the revolt against Spain, was quite literally worshipped as a messiah complete with

twelve apostles. For instance, one church even has the cross bearing an image of Rizal instead of Christ. A tract printed by the church says that Rizal was "appointed by Divine Power and ordained to earth in this new cycle to redeem His people from slavery." [27] Benigno Aquino assumed power as a spiritual incarnation of former leaders including both Rizal and his legacy Christ. Of Corazon, Buruma concludes that her main strength is her husband's legacy. She continues the tradition of spiritual reincarnation. [28]

In the future it is likely that highly emotional appeals will be effective for American audiences. The surprise vote for additional aid not only provided tangible commitment to the Philippine president but also expressed the American desire to save a newly founded democracy. If further aid is not forthcoming, the guilt about the potential loss of a democracy reclaimed by peasants at the polls will be tremendous. Such a prospect may in itself be an overwhelming reason to increase financial commitments to the unstable democracy.

In addition, the U.S. image as a protector of freedom is sustained by its support of the Philippines. The Philippines becomes almost a subservient, perhaps even a colonial interest for the U.S. as the tie between the two nations is reaffirmed and strengthened. For the Reagan administration, support of the failed Marcos is forgotten in the success of the new democracy. This provides added incentive to keep the financial aid flowing.

However, the mythos has its dark side as well. The image of widowhood and headless family seeking a new home and protector may further add to Aquino's posture as an impotent, fragile leader. Her position on the NPA and an unstable, quarrelling cabinet may provide signs of weakness and inability to cope with the harsh realities of life. Others may come to share Marcos' opinion that a woman is someone "gentle, who does not challenge a man." [29]

At home in the Philippines, Aquino's position of weakness is further cemented by her opponents' reputations for strong-arm

tactics and willingness to make hard decisions. Former Marcos Defense Minister Juan Ponce Enrile is one such figure of strength and determination. [30] In direct opposition to Aquino's posture of helpless widowhood, perhaps his position is strengthened by the contrast while hers is further undermined.

Finally, the position Aquino expresses regarding the polarization of good and evil, the inability of good and evil to coexist may be internally inconsistent with her stand on communist insurgency. If atrocities and clashes continue, she will be forced to take harsher action and employ the very "hammer and tongs" she accused Marcos of using to staunch the flow of Communism. In sum, she may be forced to use the very methods of oppression she condemns.

At this point, however, the romantic mythos of the hero defeating the villain has worked successfully in both the Philippines and the U.S. The U.S. has taken on the role of protector of widows and children following the admonition of Abraham Lincoln. [31] For the present time slavery has been replaced by freedom and the mythos is completed both in the Philippines and U.S.

1. Christopher Simpson, "House OKs Aquino Aid After Speech," Washington Times, 19 Sept. 1986, p. 10A.

2. A. James Gregor, Crisis in the Philippines; A Threat to U.S. Interests (Washington: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1984), p. 55.

3. Pamela G. Hollie, "Marcos Foe, in U.S., Dreams of a Filipino Democracy," New York Times, 21 July 1980, p. A2.

4. "Corazon Aquino Concedes Difficulties," New York Times, 8 December 1985, p. E3.

5. Richard G. Lugar, "Stand by Cory Aquino," Editorial, Washington Post, 17 Sept. 1986, p. A15.

6. George P. Shultz, "Reform in the Philippines and American Interests: The U.S. Role in Consolidating Democracy," Foreign Policy Association, New York City, 4 June 1986.

7. "Cory in Charge," The Nation, 4 Oct. 1986, p. 300.

8. Gerald M. Boyd, "Reagan Offers Aquino Wide Support," New York Times, 18 Sept. 1986, p. A3.

9. Lucy Komisar, Corazon Aquino: The Story of a Revolution (New York: George Braziller, 1987), p. 190.

10. Northrup Frye, "The Expanding World of Metaphor," Journal of the American Academy of Religion, 53 (1985), 594.

11. Cong. Rec., Sept. 18, 1986, pp. H7073-7075. All subsequent references to speech text paragraphs are bracketed in the paper.

12. Sources reporting ten interruptions by applause: Joanne Omang, "Aquino Appeals to Congress," Washington Post, 19 Sept. 1986, p. A1; Timothy McQuay and Fred Anklam, "House OKs an Additional $200 Million," USA Today, 19 Sept. 1986, p. 4A; Nancy Cooper, Kim Willenson, and Jane Whitmore, "The Woman in Yellow Takes the Hill," Newsweek, 29 Sept. 1986, p. 38; Chalikhon Suraphongchai, "Mrs. Aquino Scores a Hit," Bangkok Post (Thailand), 23 Sept. 1986, p. 5. Other sources report eleven interruptions: Peter Osterlund, "Philippine President Asks for More Aid, Gets Warm Applause," Christian Science Monitor, 19 Sept. 1986, p. 4; Robert Pear, "Lawmakers Hear Aquino on Rebels," New York Times, 19 Sept. 1986, p. A17; Michael S. Serrill, "Cory Hit s a Grand Slam," Time, 29 Sept. 1986, p. 44; Mark Fineman, "Congress Cheers Aquino; House Votes Aid Increase," Los Angeles Times, 19 Sept. 1986, p. 1; "Aquino Calls on Congress to Support' People Power'" Jakarta Post (Indonesia), 20 Sept. 1986, p. 5; "Corazon Hits a Home Run," The Star (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia), 20 Sept. 1986, p. 13. One reporter counted eight interruptions: Simpson, p. 1A.

13. Simpson, p. 1A; "Aquino Appeals for Help to Rebuild RP," Bangkok Post (Thailand), 20 Sept. 1986, p. 6; Francisco S. Tatad, "A Season of Magic," Business Day (Philippines), 22 Sept. 1986, p. 4; Suraphongchai, p. 5.

14. Komisar, p. 191; Fineman, p. 1; "Aquino Calls on Congress to Support 'People Power'," p. 5; "Corazon Hits a Home Run," p. 13; Gaby Manalac, "World-class Slugger," Editorial, Business Day (Philippines), 22 Sept. 1986, p. 5; Suraphongchai, p. 5; Serrill, p. 44.

15. Omang, p. A19.

16. Simpson, p. 16.10A.

17. Fineman, p. 19.

18. "Corazon Aquino: New Hope for Philippine Democracy," narr. Alan Berlo, National Public Radio, Washington, D. C., 16 Sept. 1986.

19. Cong. Rec., 18 Sept. 1986, p. H7216.

20. Omang, p. A19.

21. Pear, p. A17.

22. Steven Pressman, "Aquino on the Hill: Warm Words, Added Aid," Cong. Quarterly Weekly Report, 20 Sept. 1986, p. 2186.

23. Daniel F. Doeppers, "Report on the Discussion: Social Change, Social Needs, and Social Policy," Rebuilding a Nation: Philippine Challenges and American Policy, ed. Carl H. Lande (Washington: Washington Institute Press, 1987), p. 280.

24. Doeppers, p. 280.

25. Justin J. Green, "Political Socialization, Filipino Values, and Prospects for Democracy," Rebuilding a Nation: Philippine Challenges and American Policy, ed. Carl H. Lande (Washington: Washington Institute Press, 1987), p. 261.

26. Doeppers, p. 281.

27. Ian Buruma, "Who Can Redeem Mother Filipinas?" New York Review of Books, 16 Jan. 1986, p. 27.

28. Buruma, p. 32.

29. Seth Mydans, "Manila Will Limit Vote Inspections," New York Times, 22 Jan. 1986, p. 4.

30. Komisar, p. 190.

31. Abraham Lincoln, "Second Inaugural Address" Inaugural Addresses of the Presidents of the United STates (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1961), p. 128.